Cultural Daily

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The Writing Window

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, August 31st, 2011

I have writer friends who tell me they only get real writing done when they go on writing retreats, and hole up for a month at a time. There's something about the change of scene and place that makes work better, they say, or at least flow more easily.

We came up to Mendocino because Lori was taking a class at the Art Center here, and I took the opportunity to make my own writing retreat, to shape up a book I've been writing for the past several months. You drive along Highway 128 to get in and out of Mendocino, and although it's only 60 miles it takes a couple of hours to wind though the forest. Redwoods blur through the car windows, then the fog comes, and you know you're nearing the coast.

Mendocino is a mid-19th century village dotted with dozens of century-old water towers. Its Art Center is world class, both in terms of artists-in-residence and facilities, and the village is quiet. You can walk from one end of town to the other in 15 minutes, and, unlike Los Angeles, you notice the infrequent sound of cars.

The room we rented had a little bedroom upstairs, with the bed wedged between the angles of the sloping ceiling. On the opposite side of the room, a window overlooked one of Mendocino's three churches, and farther on the ocean broke against a spit of rocks, although in the foggy microclimate here I only saw the waves occasionally. The former owner built an L-shaped desk at this window – I was told she was a writer – where she used to look out the window and write, too. The desk is small, with each side of the L about three feet, and it was only about two feet wide. That's where I sat to write.

My book is about the way creative work moves out into the world. I'm not writing from the perspective of an artist – I'm not an artist – and I'm not writing about how to make yourself creative. There are lots of ways to do that, and artists have a better handle on it than I do. My book shares what I have learned as a producer, and gives creative people a step-by-step path to get their work to audiences and markets, and save them time, money, and sanity.

In the sparse room, there was a sense of dedication. I found it revealing to be a non-artist, writing in a process that artists often construct for themselves – the retreat setting.

There was a day I wrote a single sentence. It turned out to be a good sentence – I think – and it is the first sentence of the book, so it merited some consideration. But a whole day? Another day, I was full with self-disgust at procrastination, just waiting, and then after there was nothing left to do, the realization that I just had sit down, even for 5 minutes, and address the page at hand. So I

did, and the 5 minutes become 10, and eventually an hour, and then I needed to change the Alison Krauss album I was playing on Spotify.

By the time we had to leave, I had the whole thing outlined, then outlined again, and even finished a few pages. At least now there is something to rewrite. Going on retreat to write – or to produce anything – is, I've come to realize, more than a matter of dedication. For me it was an act of faith, faith that by being there and concentrated, the sentences would come, that beyond the fog, even though you can't see it, is salt water and rock.

The inn where we stayed was very nice and I'm happy to recommend it: Alegria.

For the record, yes, this is really a photo of the window (click to enlarge), not a stock shot. Yes, I actually do take notes with a fountain pen, because I like the way it writes, but it is a cheap one, because I am good at losing pens. However, I write on a laptop, because I type faster than I write by hand.

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